1: Childs M-5 (1924-1940) 1949 FP 13 Mbundu FP 13

111

CHAPTER VII

ADOLESCENCE

From Puberty until Marriage

The Youth (*Ukuenje* or *umālēhē*); The Girl (*Ufeko*)

THE onset of puberty is generally late among the Ovimbundu both for boys and for girls.[1] The number of individuals who have exact records of their birth is not yet large, and for other reasons it is difficult to collect a large mass of exact data on this subject. From exact data in a few cases, biographical and genealogical data in more, and observation of a great many, I have concluded that, in general, puberty comes for girls at about fourteen to sixteen and for boys at about fifteen to seventeen. I have the impression that this may be due to faulty diet and other poor conditions of living. A careful study of this problem might yield interesting and significant results.

Soon after puberty young people generally stop sleeping in the parents' house. The girls congregate in kitchens and each boy builds himself a house. 'When he builds he does not wait for anyone to act as his teacher at all: he just goes ahead. A boy's father will show him saying, Begin there your house; stand a pole here, another there, and in the ground between, run a trench straight through. Then he will begin to cut poles and after that to build (the house) and thatch it. On the day of plastering it, they will show him how to mix the mud and throw it on, right up to the eaves.'[2] This is the boy's own house in which he will live through adolescence and young manhood, and to which he will bring his bride.

Before his marriage can take place, there must be a great deal of preparation, most of which must be undertaken by the young man himself, just as he has himself built the house. Umbundu adolescent development involves growth and progress on those lines already begun in childhood, but it takes on a conscious urge and direction, for it is now preparation for the responsibilities of adult life,

[1] This is in contradiction to the opinion given by Magyar (op. cit., p. 283). Might it be that dietary and other conditions of life have changed enough in eighty years to produce this result? I think it more likely that Magyar's observations were faulty.

[2] R. Kavita Evambi: manuscript cited.

1: Childs M-5 (1924-1940) 1949 FP13 Mbundu FP13

883 chiefly for marriage. Indeed, marriage is the beginning of adulthood; no Ocimbundu is considered fully an adult until married.

841 Where the initiation camps have not taken hold, i.e. among the great majority of the people, it is the father's sister (*apahãi*) whose duty it is, at least in theory, to tell her brother's daughter how she should take care of herself during the times of menstrual flow. Actually a girl generally learns such things from observation and from girls of the immediately superior age-group, her sisters and cousins. She will not need to be told that during those times a girl or woman must not even touch anything belonging to a man and especially she must have nothing to do with preparing his food. This period is known as 'sitting on the ground' (*oku tumãlã posi*) since that is what a woman is supposed to do at that time. Modern usage has also taken that phrase to mean 'unemployment'.[1]

582 In the house which the boy or young man has built for himself, one of the most characteristic customs of adolescence among the Ovimbundu takes place: the trial marriage. There are several Umbundu names for this custom, as *oku tumisa* (lit. to cause to send), referring to the fact that the young man sends a male friend or relative both to ask permission of the girl's mother and also to bring the girl each night to his hut. Names for the correlative but all-inclusive custom are *uponji*, the girl being called *eponji*; and *uvaisi*, the girl being called *ombaisi*. A young man may first *tumisa* at about seventeen to eighteen years of age, but he must have acquired enough to make small presents to the girl and to her parents and he must have or have in prospect money or goods sufficient to make the betrothal payment.[2] This payment is known as *itambelo*, 'enticements', or *oku lupula ikuelume*, 'chasing away jealousies'. This indicates that the custom of *uvaisi* is definitely regarded as a prelude to marriage. For this reason, the term 'trial [836] marriage' is preferred to that of 'premarital sexual intercourse'. The nature of the intercourse, moreover, is carefully circumscribed. 'When the respective parents have agreed, then those of the girl will warn her saying, Should that boy be bad, and want to play with your cloth, even though it be late at night, run away.'[3] In such a case the boy's parents would take him to task and require that for the time being he sleep in their kitchen and so under

[1] For early notice of this cf. Magyar, op. cit., p. 284.
[2] From 10,00 to 50,00 *Angolares* according to locality, family, status, &c.
[3] From a manuscript dictated by R. Kalupeteka of Ngalangi.

1: Childs M-5 (1924-1940) 1949 FP13 Mbundu FP13

178 936 of marriage through all these changes, whether with or without the trial marriage, is a testimony to the vitality of their culture.

883 Young people of the same age-groups are thrown constantly more closely together during adolescence in all their activities and in all aspects of their life. Strengthening of the age-groups is therefore to be expected. New names are taken at this time and the names received at birth discarded so far as possible. Boys used to go off together on hunts, on trading expeditions, &c. The girls work more individually in the fields, but are together in such communal labours as harvests. The preparation of food allows them more sociability and they have the additional advantage of congregating in kitchens not only for meals, but for the night as well. Ceremonial and social occasions are always opportunities for those of the same age-groups to get together. There is a limited amount of fagging of the immediately inferior age-group, but it is not institutionalized save where initiation camps have entered the picture.

883 535 533 Folk-lore, music, and the dance have very important roles in the education of the young. The Bantu are probably among the most naturally musical of all peoples and the Ovimbundu are perhaps excelled by few other Bantu. Their vocal ability is certainly superior to that of several of their immediate neighbours. Many of their songs are sung in connexion with dances. Other musical forms are road and work songs. Dancing is much enjoyed during adolescence but by no means only at that time, for it is learned in early childhood, very soon after walking, and continued on through life as long as the man or woman can get about unaided. It is a great sight to see toddlers, hardly more than able to walk, climb down off their mothers' backs and try a few steps at dancing; or again, to see a wizened and white-haired old man or woman step out and execute a *pas seul* on some ceremonial occasion. The adolescents, however, enjoy their dancing most, and they are the originators of most of the new steps and new dances which appear from time to time. The dance is of great importance to Umbundu life: social, educational, and ceremonial.

It remains to speak briefly of two institutions, neither of which is practised extensively throughout the country, nor does either seem to be a typical or integral part of Umbundu culture. These are the institutions of initiation at puberty, and the communistic order of the *vakuacisoko* (lit. 'those of the set').

Vakuacisoko (lit. "those of the set") (1)

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Childs consideres that the custom of *vacuacisoko* is probably connected with circumcision and initiation. It does not exist throughout the territory but only in certain families who belong to the order and are said to pass it on by heredity. It seems to have been stronger in the past, but few practising members of the set are now known. All 'coevals' or members of the set were in duty bound to render mutual assistance, and all had mutual rights to the property of the others without complaint or remedy. These rights seem to have included that of having intercourse with each other's wives. Injury or even death of one member brought about by another did not allow the injured family to seek revenge or legal redress. It was the duty of the *vacuacisoko* to bury their fellows, themselves digging the grave and attending to all the expenses ordinarily supplied by the family of the deceased. They also had the duty of burying strangers without family who would not be buried by others for fear of defilement or responsibility for their debts.(2) Childs describes the *vacuacisoko* associations as "age-grade sets",(3) but gives no further explanation.

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"With or without initiation rites, adolescence is largely preparation for marriage and full adult life. Traditionally, adolescence is not a time of conflict or stress....Contract and *corvée* labour have brought profound changes, especially for the young men. As for the girls, a few have gone into the towns; relatively few, however, other than those who attend a boarding-school, lead a life essentially different from that which has been traditionally theirs."(4)

MARRIAGE

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Available information concerning degrees of relationship in which marriage is permitted, marriage-payment, polygyny and divorce has been given above.(5) Evambi(6) and Hambly(7) describe some of the customs and ceremonies connected with marriage.

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For three nights after the commencement of the marriage ceremony the girl sleeps with her own parents, while the married woman and six unmarried girls whom she has chosen as her attendants sleep in the house of her husband. On the fourth day she moves to the man's house, bringing her cooking utensils. For the first month, according to Hambly, or, according to Evambi, the first year, i.e. until the grain is ripe in her new fields, she lives with her husband's mother or aunt, in whose kitchen she cooks food each night to send to her husband in the *onjango*. When her first child is two or three months old, a present of a pig passes from the girl's mother to her husband.

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Childs(8) adds that adulthood comes with marriage, and marriage is only recognised as complete when the first child has been born. A child or an adolescent is only a "potential" person *(osunu)* and the permanency

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(1) Childs, op.cit., p.115.
(2) Those who buried a man were considered responsible for his debts. Hence corpses were often placed in trees.
(3) Childs, op.cit., p.59.
(4) Ibid., p.117.
(5) Pp.20f.
(6) 1938.
(7) 1934, pp 180f.
(8) Op.cit., pp.119-20.